The Education of Jesus in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas

THE EDUCATION OF JESUS IN THE INFANCY GOSPEL OF THOMAS

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1. *Introduction*

The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* remains one of the most enigmatic and yet perennially fascinating texts among the corpus of extant early Christian writings. At best, only partially satisfying answers have been provided to questions relating to the purpose and intended audience of this text. The most significant problem arises from the portrayal of Jesus who is both petulant and capricious. Keith Elliott states matters even more strongly, describing the boy Jesus of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (*IGT*) as 'an *enfant terrible* who seldom acts in a Christian way.'[1] This is no anachronistic assessment, misread through the lens of contemporary Christian piety, but a judgment that would be appropriate in any period of church history. Interpreters of this text are, therefore, left with a perplexing and perhaps inexplicable problem of accounting for a portrayal of a maverick young Jesus, who is malicious and malevolent, who maims and murders playmates, and yet the way this character is presented is presumably meant to be beneficial to pious readers who wish to know about the childhood years of the figure in whom they have placed their faith. There is little in the text to suggest that the portrait is intentionally subversive. The young Jesus undergoes attitudinal development, but the purpose hardly appears to be to map out psychological or emotional development. Without doubt the figure is a prodigious wonder-worker, yet his powers are too often destructive and unbridled.

While such fundamental questions remain, the purpose of this discussion is more modest than resolving these issues in their entirety. Instead the focus is upon a recurring feature of the long form of the text.[2] On three occasions there are attempts to educate Jesus. These pedagogical pericopae have differing levels of success in terms of the schooling of the young child. Apart from being a repeated theme in the text, the so-called alpha-beta logion is also the earliest attested non-canonical tradition contained in the *IGT*, for a version of the story was known to Irenaeus as early as the last quarter of the second century.[3] This does not imply that *IGT* itself was in existence by that date, but one of the central stories in its narrative that appears to be generative of other variations and recensions of the same story was valued in certain Christian circles during the second century. In this way one is able to detect a longing among early Christian readers to know more about the life of Jesus, and especially his childhood years, than could be gleaned from the canonical accounts. Here the discussion will look at the three scenes of Jesus' schooling both individually while recognizing they are related tradition. Next the cumulative effect of their sequential placement in *IGT* will be assessed. Then it will be considered whether the school scenario envisaged within the narrative is an accurate portrayal of what is known of education of children in antiquity. Finally, the discussion will probe some possible

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[1] J.K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: OUP, 1993; rev. ed. 1999) 68.

[2] The various recensions of the text have been well documented. One of the fullest treatments is to be found in T. Burke (ed.), *De infantia Iesu euangelium Thomae graece*, CCSA 17 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010).

[3] *Ad. Haer.* 1.20.1.

insights into the setting and purpose of *IGT* based upon the analysis of these three incidents.

Prior to commencing the discussion of the educational scenes in *IGT*, it is necessary to offer some clarification concerning the form of the text to be consulted here. The longest form of the text tends to be presented as a nineteen-chapter edition in printed collections. This form appears in the majority of printed editions of *IGT*. The *IGT* is highly likely to have been composed in Greek. The archetype, or *Ausgangstext*,[4] is no longer recoverable with any degree of precision. Moreover, as reflected in the surviving manuscripts there is a short recension of the texts which exists only in various versions such as part of the Latin tradition, the Syriac, Ethiopic, and Georgian. There also exists a longer recension of the text, which has been expanded in various ways and is evidenced by Greek and Slavonic manuscripts, as well as part of the Latin tradition. The shortest form of the expanded recension, known as Gs, is probably the earliest surviving form of the Greek text; it contains seventeen chapters (it omits *IGT* 17-18, as contained in the longer Greek mss). Three further recensions of the Greek text are discernible, Ga, Gb, and Gd. Two of these, Ga and Gd, are both expanded forms of the text which are now divided into nineteen chapters, whereas Gb appears to be a selective abbreviation of Ga, omitting Ga's chapters 12, and 14-19. The printed editions of Gb are usually presented in an eleven-chapter arrangement. However, even where the four text forms parallel each other the parallel material is often rewritten, and contains its own unique textual features.[5]

The versification of the various text forms within their chapter arrangements is also an area in which scholarly consistency has not been achieved. Burke perhaps follows a slightly more widespread convention with fewer, but longer verse divisions in the chapters.[6] By contrast, Hock has divided the text using a greater number of shorter verses in each chapter.[7] While this second system is not as widespread, it does allow more precision in finding passages under discussion. Therefore, since no consistent practice has been established, and because Hock's versification assists reader in consulting the text, while the standard chapter divisions are used for referencing, here Hock's system of versification will be followed.

In this study the text form that is followed is generally that of Ga, which is the best attested of the nineteen-chapter forms of the Greek text. The Gs form may be earlier,[8] and at a number of points it differs in wording and sentence structure from Ga. It major difference is the omission of the material in Ga designated as chapters 17-18. However, since this section does not contain education scenes, it is not directly relevant to the study at hand. The wording of the parallel educational scenes in Ga and Gs differs at various points, and these differences will be noted where relevant.

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[4] This term is used in parallel to recent approaches to the textual criticism of the Greek NT, which instead of speaking of the 'original' text prefer to speak with more precision concerning the *Ausgangstext*. That is the 'initial text', which denotes the earliest recoverable phase of the textual tradition. This may be several stages earlier than the earliest extant manuscripts, but does not claim to be equivalent with an 'original' text – even if it is claimed that the term 'original text' still retained heuristic significance. See E.J. Epp, 'The Multivalence of the Term "Original Text" in New Testament Textual Criticism', *HTR* 92 (1999) 245-281.

[5] For a full-scale discussion of the textual issues and the manuscript history, with an accompanying stemma, see Burke (ed.), *De infantia Iesu euangelium Thomae graece*, 173-222, esp. the stemma on 222.

[6] Burke (ed.), *De infantia Iesu euangelium Thomae graece*, esp. 293-539.

[7] R.F. Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge, 1995) 104-143.

[8] A seventh century provenance is tentatively suggested by Burke, see Burke (ed.), *De infantia Iesu euangelium Thomae graece*, 215.

The form contained in Ga dates from before the tenth century. Burke argues that like Gs it demonstrates the 'same need to domesticate IGT's Jesus.'[9] This is done through the addition of the positive healing stories in Ga 17-18, as well as redactional comments that tone down the harshness of the narrative at various points, and the re-ordering of some material. Whereas Gs is supported by only one manuscript with certainty,[10] Ga has the widest support with seven extant manuscripts preserving its text (although four are in a close 'family' relationship).

2. *Jesus' Education according to the Infancy Gospel of Thomas*

The longer recension of *IGT* (Ga) contains three incidents that depict attempts to have Jesus educated, although admittedly with varying degrees of success. While there is both a folkloric and miraculous quality to these stories, especially in their depiction of the supernatural intelligence and superior perspicacity of the child in comparison to his schoolmasters, there is nothing implicit in the narratives to suggest that Jesus' attendance at school was anything other than a natural expectation. The theological point of the three narratives is the futility of trying to impart human wisdom to a child who possesses such deep spiritual insight. However, the three scenes convey this point in different ways. Two of the pericopae in *IGT* are variants of the so-called Alpha-Beta logion (*IGT* 6-7; 14), while the third schooling scene (*IGT* 15) provides a further image of Jesus being tutored, although it is linked to the preceding story. In the first two stories Jesus' superiority is recognized through various degrees of conflict, while in the third scene there is a resigned acceptance on the part of the teacher that he has nothing to offer the would-be pupil.

2.1 The First Educational Scene (*IGT* 6-7)

The child's initial encounter with formal education is not simply a single episodic scene, but a 'cycle of stories centered around Jesus' being taught to read by the teacher Zacchaeus.'[11] This complex of stories is redactionally woven into the fabric of the larger narrative, so that the opening is linked to the preceding incidents. The previous scene commences with Joseph rebuking his son privately, κατ' ἰ δί αν (*IGT* 5.1). However, as the scene unfolds its dialogue has become public, with the fearful crowd declaring in narratival unison 'every word he says, whether good or bad, was a deed and becomes a marvel', (*IGT* 5.3). In response to Jesus' malicious behaviour and the fear of the villagers, Joseph in an act of brutality grabs his son's ear and pulls it hard. Jesus warns his father concerning the foolishness of his actions, and cautions against being made upset. It is at this point, that the narrative moves into its first educational scene. One of those listening to the conversation between father and son, a teacher by name of Zacchaeus, recognizes the potential in the child Jesus. Consequently, Zacchaeus charges Joseph to place the child under his tutelage in order that 'he can learn his letters. I will teach him everything he needs to know so he will not be unruly', (*IGT* 6.3). The implied curriculum in this statement would appear to encapsulate rudimentary reading, combined with a good dose of discipline. There follows a further exchange first with the teacher (*IGT* 6.4-8), then with the crowd characterized as 'the Jews' (*IGT* 6.9-12) with both incidents allowing Jesus to declare

[9] Burke (ed.), *De infantia Iesu euangelium Thomae graece*, 216.
[10] The eleventh century manuscript H, Jerusalem, *Cod. Sabait. 259* contains the text of the Gs, and possibly manuscript O, Vienna, *Phil. gr. 162 (144)*, before 1455 C.E.
[11] Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, 113.

his pre-existence ('I existed along with the one who sent me to you', *IGT* 6.10, cf. *IGT* 6.4).

After the intervening speeches from Joseph, Jesus, and the Jews, the teacher re-issues the invitation to Joseph to have the child schooled, 'bring him to the classroom and I shall teach him letters', (*IGT* 6.13). The expression διδάξω γράμματα echoes the fuller offer at the beginning of the pericope ἵ να μάθῃ γράμματα καὶ διδάξω αὐτόν (*IGT* 6.2). This emphasizes the basic insight that the curriculum consists primarily of learning one's letters. Moreover, unsurprisingly, the Greek text of *IGT* assumes that the child will learn the Greek alphabet with the tutor writing the alphabet for the child, καὶ ἔγραψεν αὐτῷἀλφάβητον καθηγητής (*IGT* 6.15). The one who is providing instruction in letters, Zacchaeus, is described using two different terms to depict his profession. Initially he is introduced as διδάσκαλος in an almost titular sense. In this first version of the Alpha-Beta logion διδάσκαλος occurs four times (6.1; twice in 6.6; and 6.21). The other term that is used more or less interchangeably is καθηγητής, which occurs five times (6.4, 13, 14, 16, 19). These terms are used more or less equivalently to refer to the same person.[12] Consequently they are best understood as synonyms.[13]

A further aspect of the educative process that is highlighted is the disciplinary procedure used by the teacher. When the child remains silent refusing to repeat the letters after they are articulated by the teacher, the narrator of *IGT* comments that 'the teacher having become angry struck him on the head' (*IGT* 6.16). While the child takes the blow calmly, it is also an opportunity for the young Jesus to demonstrate his superior understanding of the allegorical nature of letters. The monologue provides the explanation of the letter alpha:

> Listen teacher, and understand the order of the first element. Pay close attention how it has sharp lines and a middle stroke, which you see pointing, standing with legs apart, meeting, spreading drawn aside, elevated, dancing in chorus, in triple rhythm, two-cornered, of the same form, of the same thickness, of the same family, holding the measuring cord, in charge of the balance, of equal measure, of equal proportions, these are the lines of the alpha. (*IGT* 6.22-23)

While the type of wisdom possessed by the young child might appear to resonate with some of the hidden knowledge of Christian 'gnostic' sects or mystery religion cults, the understanding in *IGT* is that such insights are simply allegorical (*IGT* 7.1). As Aasgard notes this incident reveals that Jesus cannot be dominated, he knows everything, and has power over all things. Specifically, this incident also highlights the incredible rhetorical skills the child is able to deploy. Thus when 'Zacchaeus wants to teach him the alphabet, Jesus with erudition and speaking ability drives him and the watching crowd to silence (6:7, 9), and finally Zacchaeus to despair (7:1-2).'[14] So one of the key concerns of the educational scenes in *IGT* is to show that Jesus' learning and insight already surpasses what can be gained from human sources.

The result is that Zacchaeus laments his failure to instruct the child. The sad soliloquy that follows portrays a teacher who is ashamed of his self-perceived lack of pedagogical skill, and his inferior insight into the hidden meanings of letters. However, what is perhaps of more significance is the sequence of begrudging

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[12] For a fuller discussion on this point see P. Foster, 'Educating Jesus: The Search for a Plausible Context', *JSHJ* 4 (2006) 7-33, here 24.

[13] *LSJ* and *BDAG* understand the terms καθηγητής and διδάσκαλος as broadly synonymous, offering the translations '*teacher*, *professor*', for the former and '*teacher'* as the primary meaning for the latter. See *LSJ* 421 and 852; *BDAG* 241 and 490.

[14] R. Aasgard, *The Childhood of Jesus: Decoding the Apocryphal Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (Eugene, OR.: Cascade, 2009) 105.

attributes and Christological qualities that the teacher has come to recognize in the child. Jesus is described as having a severe look, lucid speech, not being an ordinary mortal, and having the ability even to tame fire. Precisely what is meant by the final epitaph is uncertain – is this a self-referential metaphor with the teaching seeing himself as the fire that his been tamed, or does this reflect some physical power of Jesus to tame actual fire although this is not evidenced elsewhere in the narrative? Given the fairly straightforward sense of the rest of the descriptions in this list, although no miracle is recorded that shows Jesus taming fire, it is more likely that in addition to those super-human powers that have been displayed the narrative also attributes to Jesus the ability to control physical fire. In terms of the child's origin, the first teacher tentatively affirms what Jesus himself declared earlier 'perhaps he was born before the creation of the world', (*IGT* 7.4; cf. Jesus' own statements, *IGT* 6.6, 10). Furthermore, in terms of origins, the teacher expresses the following perplexed enquiries: 'what sort of womb bore him, what sort of mother nourished him? – I do not know', (*IGT* 7.5). Thus attempted education has become, at least in the narrative world of the text, a vehicle for Christological pronouncements. However, the most startling rhetorical reflection on the child's nature comes in Zacchaeus' final statement: 'What great thing he is – god or angel or whatever else I might call him – I do not know' (*IGT* 7.11). Therefore, even amid confusion and bewilderment, the author of *IGT* allows his characters to recognize something of Jesus' divine origin and nature.

It has been noted by Aasgard that, 'there is a distinct slapstick quality to the episode: the scene is construed in a way aiming at comic effect.'[15] While the comic elements are certainly present, it does appear to be more the aim of the narrative to 'construe' the scene for Christological effect rather than comic value. That being the case, the educational details that protrude through the narrative are incidental to its wider purposes, and hence may reflect what the author took to be realistic and reflective of contemporary schooling in his own setting. The child commences formal education at the age of five.[16] The curriculum focuses on the acquisition of the rudiments of reading – the learning of letters – combined with moral education produced through a fairly robust sense of discipline. The narrative portrays a one-on-one method of instruction, with the child being tutored by himself, although in the narrative world both father and villagers are present as observers. This final detail appears to have been 'reshaped' to fit the requirements of the discourse scene,[17] and to allow space for the requisite audience participation.

2.2 The Second Educational Scene (*IGT* 14)

The second educational scene is much shorter than the first. However, many of the same themes and details recur, and like the first educational scene this one is also woven tightly into the fabric of the larger narrative. This linkage is achieved in two ways. First, following on from the plank-stretching story (*IGT* 13), the narrative continues with the linking phrase, ᾽Ιδὼν δὲ ᾽Ιωσὴφ τὴν προθυμίαν τοῦ παιδίου καὶ τὴν ἡλικίαν καὶ τὸν νοῦν (*IGT* 14.1). Second, the narrative consciously harks back to the first educational scene with the explanatory comment, 'The teacher knew of the

[15] Aasgard, *The Childhood of Jesus*, 48.

[16] The usual age at which children commenced elementary education in the ancient world was seven, see, H.I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* (trans. G. Lamb; New York: Collins, 1956) 229-313. Hence *IGT* may be suggesting by this early start that Jesus was more advanced than other children.

[17] Aasgard, *The Childhood of Jesus*, 39.

child's previous experience and was afraid of him', (*IGT* 14.2). Nonetheless, there are fresh details that are worth noting since they cast more light on the assumed educational process reflected in this text.

Despite the previous negative encounter with formal education, Joseph's second attempt is motivated by a desire that the child should 'not be inexperienced with letters', (*IGT* 14.1, Ga; note the various variants 'not to be in lack of letters', Gs; 'so that he might learn letters', Gd).[18] This time it is Joseph who approaches a teacher to provide instruction is learning letters. Interestingly, in the text of both Ga and Gd (although the detail is missing in the shorter text of Gs), the teacher asks Joseph which letters he should teach the child first. The answer is 'first the Greek, then the Hebrew', (*IGT* 14.2). Precisely what can be inferred from this is less certain. Does the text reveal that it was written in a bilingual setting, or is this an attempt to provide a detail that may suggest Jesus' Galilean origin? Perhaps the answer is more theologically based, ensuring that readers will believe that Jesus would have the linguistic knowledge of both Hellenistic and Jewish culture. The prioritization of Greek over Hebrew may initially appear somewhat odd. By contrast, in the first scene the implication was that Jesus learnt the Greek alphabet. This appeared to imply either ignorance or lack of concern on the part of the narrator that this assumption may have been anachronistic in terms of the linguistic setting of Jesus' upbringing.

In some respects the encounter with the second teacher serves as a recapitulation of ideas that emerged in the first educational scene. The child is unresponsive in the face of instruction from the second teacher. When the young Jesus does speak, he repeats his initial challenge that the teacher should explain the deeper meaning of the letters. Once more the teacher responds with violence, hitting Jesus on the head. Jesus' reaction is far less restrained than it had been during the first educational scene when Zacchaeus struck him. On this second occasion, he becomes angry and curses the second unnamed schoolmaster. The three Greek recensions depict the result of the curse as having various levels of severity. What is probably the oldest form of the text states that 'the teacher fell and died' (*IGT* 14.4, Gs). By contrast, the other two recension that contain this incident record similar but less severe fates: 'and at once he swooned and fell upon his face' (*IGT* 14.4, Ga); 'and at one fainting, he fell' (*IGT* 14.4, Gd). These apparently later forms reflect what Burke has identified as the later recension's tendency 'to domesticate IGT's Jesus.'[19] Here, the attempt to tone down the consequence of this specific curse is part of the wider phenomenon that appears to evolve within the various recensions of *IGT*, namely transforming the malicious portrayal of Jesus into a more palatable and understanding character that is not so far removed from the canonical vision of the adult Jesus.

Apart from the detail that the child's learning is envisaged to encompass the learning of both Greek and Hebrew letters, the second educational scene provides little new informative about the educative process. Instruction involves learning letters, and this is presented as the key curriculum outcome. Encouragement toward committed and engaged learning is supplied through physical acts of punishment – such as blows to the head. These two elements are presented as 'givens' in the pre-knowledge that the audience is expected to bring to the text.

2.2 The Third Educational Scene (*IGT* 15)

[18] Burke (ed.), *De infantia Iesu euangelium Thomae graece*, 517.
[19] Burke (ed.), *De infantia Iesu euangelium Thomae graece*, 216.

There is a marked difference between the third schooling scene and the two previous incidents. The third teacher is characterized as a 'close friend of Joseph', (*IGT* 15.1). Like the first scene it is the teacher who approaches the father with the offer of educational assistance (*IGT* 15.1). This teacher has a rudimentary strategy, but again his curriculum remains consistent. He states, 'perhaps with some flattery I can teach him letters', (*IGT* 15.1). Here the narrative requires knowledge of the earlier scenes in order to make use of the third schoolroom setting as a literary foil. However, Aasgard's argument that the three scenes must have existed within the original structure of *IGT* does not necessarily follow. He states,

> Although some scholars argue that they [the three teacher episodes] are a triplication of one single narrative, it is far more likely that they – following a traditional oral pattern – have been three from the outset; the triad is witnessed in all manuscripts. … In addition, if there was originally only one episode, the narrative would loose a central point, viz., the success of the third, wise teacher following the failures of the others.[20]

However, while acknowledging that the present structure with three educative scenes does highlight the success of the third teacher, this does not necessitate the contention that there must always have been three such scenes. The third scene fits the evolving pattern of the portrayal of a more socially conditioned Jesus, who learns to live within the constraint of the human world. While one cannot recover the earliest form of the alpha-beta logion (although Irenaeus' tradition may provide assistance) it is perfectly possible to envisage an alternative scenario. Some form of the alpha-beta logion could have been part of an original collection of childhood stories that presented the maverick and malicious boy Jesus in a form that was hard to comprehend. The story was then toned-down by presenting the process by which Jesus' actions become more measured and controlled. It may be the case that the second and third scenes were added at the same redactional stage – with scene two recapitulating the problems from scene one, in order to allow the resolution of those problems in the immediately following material.[21]

In the third classroom setting a much more cautious and passive schoolmaster recedes from the scene, and Jesus dominates the educative process. This occurs in a manner that allows *IGT* to highlight Jesus' role as teacher rather than student. First the young Jesus picks up a book, but does not simply read the letters contained in its pages. Rather, issuing forth in pneumatologically inspired speech, Jesus is depicted as teaching the Law to those standing there. Here the narrative attempts to portray a Jewish context, with instruction in Torah being at the centre of education. Moreover, the vision of the young Jesus teaching may have intentional resonances with two scenes contained in Luke's gospel. First, the weaker of the two resonances may occur with the taking of the book of the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue at Capernaum (Lk 4:16-17).[22] The second resonance is more important. This incident also appears to reflect the scene of the twelve-year old Jesus teaching in the Temple in Jerusalem (Lk 2. 41-52). Not only do both stories depict a young Jesus instructing adults, and thereby showing his insight is far beyond that of his years, there is also important use of shared terminology. The Lukan Temple story is framed by two descriptions of the maturation of Jesus. The first states that the child was 'increasing in wisdom (σοφίᾳ)

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[20] Aasgard, *The Childhood of Jesus*, 38.

[21] S. Gero, 'The Infancy Gospel of Thomas: A Study of the Textual and Literary Problems', *NovT* 13 (1971) 63-64.

[22] This possibility has been recognized with due caution by Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, 135, and also with more confidence by W. Michaelis (trans.), *Die Apocryphal Schriften zum Neuen Testament* (2nd ed.; Bremen: Carl Schunemann, 1958) 111.

and the grace (χάρις) of God was upon him' (Lk 2.40b). The second summary statement employs similar vocabulary, 'Jesus kept increasing in wisdom (σοφίᾳ) and stature, and in grace (χάριτι) with God and men' (Lk 2.52). It is noticeable that in *IGT* the final declaration of the third teacher picks up the language of these two Lukan descriptions when the teacher declares, 'but already he is full of grace (χάριτι) and wisdom (σοφίας)', (*IGT* 15.6). The link is strengthened even further when it is noted that the canonical story of Jesus in the Temple, although presented in a re-written form, is used as the climax of *IGT*. Thus the dénouement of the story is to help readers see the development that led from the precocious and uncontrollable child of the early chapters of *IGT* to the adolescent presented in the final scene, who is described by the teachers of the law as possessing 'such glory and such virtue and wisdom' (*IGT* 19.10). Thus the third educative scene ends with Jesus being recognized as 'full of grace and wisdom'. At this point the child heals or revivifies the second teacher, and from this point onwards there are no maverick or malicious acts, instead the child repeatedly heals children and adults alike.

Like the previous educational scenes, this third episode assumes that the basic curriculum centres upon the child being taught letters, διδάξαι αὐτό τὸ [?] γράμματα (*IGT* 15.1). The one significant new detail concerns the equipment and furniture to be found in the classroom. On entering, the child finds a text, βιβλίος, and which is lying on what is described as a ἀναλογίον. Whether, in the mind of the narrator, the βιβλίος depicts a roll or a codex cannot be determined from the details within the pericope. If the setting is intentionally Jewish and the text is meant to represent a scriptural writing from that context then a scroll is more likely. It needs to be noted that the variant reading in Gs explicitly states that the book 'was not from God's law', (*IGT* 14.3, Gs).[23] If, however, this is a gentile Christian portrayal of a Greco-Roman education scene, then either a codex or scroll is possible.[24] The term ἀναλογίον, which denotes the surface upon which the book rests, is a rare term, and describes some kind of reading desk, stand or lectern.[25] While the final school story in *IGT* provides few significant additional details, beyond those mentioned elsewhere in the text, the cumulative weight of the three scenes now needs to be considered.

3. *The Cumulative Effect of the Three Educational Scenes*

Education, or at least the attempt to have Jesus educated, is a recurring and prominent theme throughout *IGT*. There are both common features in the three scenes, as well as new details in the second and third scenes that move the narrative forward. However, the basic point common to each episode is that Jesus' wisdom and understanding surpasses that of his teachers, and that he has no need for human education. Yet apart from that central theological emphasis, in some ways the greater interest and insight arises from the coincidental details.

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[23] The difference in chapter numbering is due to the fact that in Gs the story of the healing of the injured foot does not occur as chap. 10 as in Ga, but is delayed to chap. 16.

[24] On the rise of the codex especially in early Christian circles see C.H. Roberts and T.C. Skeat, *The Birth of the Codex* (London: The British Academy [OUP], 1983, and L.W. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) esp. 43-93.

[25] See G.W.H. Lampe (ed.), *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: OUP, 1961) 111, with the only text cited being this passage from *IGT* 15.3. See also *LSJ* which gives the meaning of ἀναλογεῖ ον as *manuale lectorium* and cites the following texts in support: Poll 10.60, Hdn.Gr.2.457.

A point that has not attracted the attention of previous commentators is that the text presupposes a community where three teachers can readily be found.[26] While this may be a narratival necessity to enable the three scenes to function cumulatively, there is no sense of embarrassment, or attempt to explain this as though it were an unusual detail. Instead this is presented as a mundane and plausible state of affairs. Hence, the underlying assumption is that of a relatively sizable community that contains both professional teachers, and educational facilities – classrooms – that are described as παιδευτήριον (*IGT* 6.8) or διδασκαλείον (*IGT* 14.2). While the narrative world of *IGT* is of course a literary construct, the text connects with the common experience of everyday rural life at a number of levels, while simultaneously clashing with normal realities through the maverick miracle-working Jesus. Thus, Aasgard is justified in his assessment that the surface depiction of a setting in Palestine during the childhood of Jesus is a 'thin veneer', hence he correctly sees the story related to reality, albeit a reality different from the one ostensibly presented in the text. Therefore, he persuasively argues that,

> it is appropriate to see IGT as primarily reflecting another world, viz., the setting(s) it originated and was retold: the material should be viewed as a window into the world of its author and audience, or at least into a world recognizable to them.[27]

In terms of the economic status of the characters in the narrative, all appear to be at a level well above poverty or peasantry. Joseph is self-employed in the artisan trade of carpentry, and the assumption latent in the text is that villagers possess the resources to buy the item he manufactures. In fact this becomes virtually explicit when Joseph receives 'an order from a rich man to make a bed for him' (*IGT* 13.1, Ga), or in a variant reading 'a beautiful and distinguished couch' (*IGT* 13.1, Gd).[28] The order is noteworthy not only because of the accompanying wood-stretching miracle performed by Jesus, but because this miracle leads Joseph to make his final attempt to have Jesus schooled.

The repeated attempts to provide suitable schooling reflect some level of social aspiration, coupled with the financial means to pay the associated fees to the teacher. Given the fact that the text supplies no details concerning precise geographical location, the date of composition, and the frequency of lessons in the rural setting, it is not possible to determine the requisite social level or the monetary cost in procuring such an education. However, other general indicators in the text support the suggestion that the majority of characters in *IGT* including Jesus' family appear to be at the level of 'some kind of middle or lower middle class.'[29]

Perhaps the most prominent common element in the three educational scenes contained in *IGT* is the detail that the central curriculum goal is to instruct the child in the learning of letters. All three teachers state this as their explicit goal. The first schoolmaster tells Joseph, 'hand him over to me so he may learn letters' (*IGT* 6.2). This becomes an important premise in the alpha-beta logion in the form known to Irenaeus (*Ad. Haer.* 1.20.1), as well as being a common element, that is developed in *IGT* to create heightened tension between each of the three teachers and their pupil. When Joseph hands the child to the second teach, the proposed curriculum is stated as

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[26] As a 'throw-away' remark, Aasgard notes that the 'village had its own educational institution, with teachers to choose among.' Aasgard, *The Childhood of Jesus*, 66. However, he fails to comment on the multiplicity of both teachers and educational venues.

[27] Aasgard, *The Childhood of Jesus*, 38.

[28] For further details of variants in this passage see Burke (ed.), *De infantia Iesu euangelium Thomae graece*, 512-513.

[29] A more extensive discussion is supplied by Aasgard, *The Childhood of Jesus*, 67-68.

being both the Greek and Hebrew alphabets – with Greek taking precedence. The reference to Hebrew is most likely an attempt to supply an authenticating detail that suggests a Judean context. However, the narrative fails to make any further use of this linguistic referent, but instead reverts to discussions about the mystical meanings of Greek letters. This demonstrates once again that the thought-world and the model of education that shape the narrative are the derived from Hellenistic norms.

Another reality that is common to the first two school scenes in *IGT* is the use of physical or corporal punishment in the process of elementary education. The first two teachers strike the child on his head when he refuses to comply with their directions (*IGT* 6.16; 14.4). On both occasions a single blow is administered, although because of the fate that befalls the second teacher it is impossible to tell whether a single blow was the intention. It should be noted that in *IGT* discipline through physical punishment is not restricted to teachers alone. His father, in the incident that leads into the first attempt at schooling takes hold of Jesus' ear and pulls it hard, (*IGT* 5.4). Such use of physical punishment to discipline children fits with both a Jewish and Hellenistic setting, although *IGT* emphasizes the folly in attempting to punish this all-powerful child.

4. *Elementary Schooling in the Ancient Mediterranean World*

Rates of literacy,[30] levels of education, and localized educational practices are all contested issues in the study of education in antiquity. This is exacerbated by the paucity of surviving sources that document the concrete practices and methods that were used in the classroom setting. Instead, there exist a number of partial details, from various authors, spread over several centuries, and from these fragmentary insights one must attempt to reconstruct a plausible picture of the ancient elementary schoolroom.

The learning of the alphabet in primary education, while a building block of further education, was also a means of instilling ethical behaviours in the young child. Hock notes that 'moral instruction was a principal task of education, and it began early. As soon as students were able to read their first sentences, they were assigned to read short maxims which inculcated values and attitudes along with pride of reading for the first time.'[31] The emphasis in initial education was on the progressive skills of recognizing letter forms, then the ability to identify letter combinations as individual words, and final the skill articulating more complex syntactical units. Hence, Cribiore describes the task of the elementary stage of education in the following manner. 'In antiquity, the accomplishments achieved at an elementary stage of instruction ranged from this embryonic form of "reading" the letter shapes to the moment when the letters, articulated into words and sentences, were read with an increasing degree of understanding.'[32] Thus at its most rudimentary level, education was for the purpose of acquiring the skill of reading. Writing was a different, although related skill. Hence it can be assumed that a significantly greater proportion of the

[30] The assessments made by Harris are still widely cited for assessing percentage levels of literacy. He postulates that in antiquity the high-point of literacy occurred in fifth century BCE Attica. He argues, 'in percentage terms the level of literacy, while still to be considered impressive in view of the obstacles to popular education, was not especially dramatic. For the population of Attica as a whole, it should probably be set in the range between 5% and 10%. W.V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) 114.

[31] Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, 102.

[32] R. Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001) 160.

population were able to read than those able to write. This would comport with the assumed curriculum for the young Jesus in *IGT*, where the three attempts at education commence with the identification and recitation of letters, and not with writing them. Even at a higher level of education, reading and rhetorical skills were often prized above what was often viewed as the technical skill of writing. Thus Cicero's son bemoans the fact that he is required to copy out the text possessed by his teacher in order to prepare it before class for analysis. Consequently he requests that his father provides him with a scribe to relieve him of that menial task.

> But I beg of you to see that a scribe is sent to me as quickly as possible – best of all a Greek, for that will relieve me of a lot of trouble in writing out lecture notes. (*ad Fam.* 16.21.8) [33]

The methods employed by teachers of reading exhibited a degree of diversity. However, repetition, or what Cribiore labels as 'skills and drills', was a fairly standard approach. She postulates that this was part of 'an inflexible intellectual gymnastics in order to compensate for the general deficiency of teaching aids and texts for inexperienced readers, and a lack of word divisions and lectional signs in texts that were available.'[34] The descriptions of the methods employed by the first two teachers in *IGT* are suggestive of an approach that is largely dependent on rote and repetitive learning. Plutarch provides further evidence for repetition of basic skills as one of the fundamental stages in the educative process:

> The first beginnings come from nature, advancement from learning, the practical use from continued repetition, and the culmination from all combined, but so far as any one of these is wanting, the moral excellence must, to this extent, be crippled. (Plut. *De. Lib.* 4).[35]

Therefore, both the curriculum and teaching methods that are portrayed in *IGT* reflect educational practices that are documented in descriptions of actual elementary education from the ancient world.

The use of discipline is another prominent feature in *IGT* (*IGT* 6.16; 14.4). While the dictum 'spare the rod and spoil the child' does not stem directly from antiquity as often supposed,[36] it sentiments find precedent in the Hebrew Bible: 'he that spares his rod hates his son; but he that loves him seeks him diligently with discipline', (Prov 13.24; cf. Prov 23.13-14). The use of physical punishment both in the home and at school was commonplace in antiquity. Although forms and instruments of punishment varied, the practice was considered part of the normal experience of education. The epigram of Phanias describes the equipment possessed by an aged schoolmaster, which he considers to be the symbols of his profession. The fixation on instruments of discipline is both illuminating and a little disturbing:

> Kallon, his limbs fettered by senile fatigue, dedicated to Hermes the Lord these tokens of his career as a schoolmaster: the staff that guided his feet, his strap, the fennel-rod that lay ever ready to his hand to hit little boys on their heads, his lithe whistling bull-tail, his one-soled slipper, and the scull-cap of his hairless head. (*Anth. Pal.* 6.294).

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[33] See H.G. Snyder, *Teachers and Texts in the Ancient World: Philosophers, Jews and Christians* (London: Routledge, 2000) 25.

[34] Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind*, 161.

[35] It has often be disputed whether Plutarch actually wrote this tractate on education. See the discussion in Plutarch, *Moralia*, with an English Translation by Frank Cole Babbitt (LCL; Cambridge, MA.: Harvard UP, 1927).

[36] The familiar form of words, 'then spare the rod, and spill [=spoil] the child' are to be found in the satirical poem of Samuel Butler, 'Hudibras' (1662). However, the maxim maybe several centuries earlier, see William Langland's *Piers Plowman* (1377), 'who-so spareth ye sprynge, spilleth his children', if it is correct to equate sprynge [= a sprig or brand of a plant] with a rod or stick used for administering a beating.

Commenting on this passage, Cribiore observes that '[t]he walking stick mentioned by Phanias was also used to punish students in school.'[37] So with the exception of the scull-cap, the badges of office cherished by the teacher Kallon were all implements that could be used to strike children. Interestingly, apart from the instruments, this text provides a single insight into the way discipline was meted out, namely by striking boys on their heads. This offers a direct parallel with the act of discipline used by the first two teachers in *IGT*. Furthermore, after citing Augustine's reminiscence of his own education, 'racks, claws, and such varieties of torments … we school boys suffered from our masters' (*Conf.* 1.9), Cribiore sagely observes that the 'advent of Christianity did not bring a change in educational methods.'[38] While Augustine recalled an experience from a secular educational context, the *IGT* creates a narrative world that is constructed for Christian readers, and attempts to project a setting in a first century Jewish context. Its only warning is that of the dire consequence of using physical punishments against this specific child, and it presents no wider vision of social reform against the excessive use of corporeal punishments. Such practices were taken as normal, and as an educational approach employed in general the use of punishment not challenged. However, perhaps the humour contained in *IGT* is subversive. It is not difficult to imagine the school child who heard tales of Jesus' successful resistance of his first two schoolmasters, enjoying his triumphs over teachers. Especially since teachers had a widespread reputation for brutalizing children during the elementary phase of their education.[39]

Only in the third school scene of *IGT* is there a description of any instructional equipment. It has already been noted that the term ἀναλογίον is rare, but it appears to denote some type of reading surface such as a desk or a stand. The more common item is the βιβλίος, which may depicts a roll or a codex that contains the text being studied. The convenience of the codex for housing multiple texts was quickly recognized by early Christian scribes.[40] Slightly later, the codex was also seen as having advantages in an educational setting as it facilitated the teaching and learning process.[41] However, Cribiore argues that it is incorrect to envisage that books were an essential component of elementary schooling, although she acknowledges their prominence at the more advanced stage of education that revolved around the analysis of standard 'school texts'. This was not only due to rudimentary levels of reading skills acquired in primary education, but she notes that 'elementary teachers did not always possess books of the authors they used so sparingly, and, when they did, … they did not always bring them to class.'[42] The book in the third schooling scene in *IGT* is present, but unused. The variant forms of the tradition emphasize that Jesus wishes to expound sacred matters, rather than to read secular texts. However, this is

[37] Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind*, 68.
[38] Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind*, 68.
[39] In later stages of education the use of physical punishments diminished substantially. This may have been due both to the increased ability of older students to defend themselves and the fear of losing an source of income if articulated adolescent students persuaded parents to move them to less severe educational institutions. See Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind*, 72-73.
[40] The precise reasons for this rapid uptake of codex technology among early Christians is not entirely obvious. Proposals include its utility for containing sub-collections of texts that would later become the New Testament, such as the Gospels or the Pauline Epistles. Other suggestions relate to the portability of texts for missionary purposes. These issues are reviewed in Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 61-80.
[41] A. Blanchard (ed.), *Les débuts du Codex, Bibliologia* 9 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1989). Also F.G. Kemyon, *The Palaeography of Greek Papyri* (Oxford: OUP, 1899) 122.
[42] Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind*, 131.

stated most clearly in the earliest extant Greek version of the text, with the other two variants alluding to the same perspective implicitly.

> Going into the classroom he found a book lying on the lectern. Taking it, he did not read what was written in it (because it was not from God's law) but opening his mouth he spoke awe-inspiring words. (*IGT* 14.3, Gs)
>
> Going boldly into the classroom he found a book lying on the lectern. Taking it, he did not read what was written in it but, opening his mouth, and he spoke by the Holy Spirit and he taught the law to those who were present, and they listened to him. (*IGT* 15.3, Ga)
>
> Jesus readily went into the classroom he found a book lying there. Taking it, he opened it and did not read the things written in the book but, opening his mouth, he spoke by the Holy Spirit and he taught his law to those who were present and listening. (*IGT* 15.3, Gd)[43]

The identity of the text that the young Jesus chooses not to read is uncertain, and was obviously of no interest to the narrator. One could infer that give the prominence of Homeric texts in early stages of education, that this is the most likely text to be in his possession. However, since the *IGT* constructs its own narrative world in which it chooses not to identify the text in question, interpreters should be equally restrained.

By considering the curriculum taught, the disciplinary practices of teachers, and the use of texts within the schoolroom setting one is able to see that *IGT* has drawn upon the *realia* of the phenomenon of elementary education in the ancient world. Since it refers to educational practices only in passing, it also provides valuable information concerning common perceptions of the ancient classroom environment.

5. *Conclusions*

Ostensibly *IGT* presents readers with a setting in which the young Jesus is to be schooled in a Jewish context. While there were many similarities in educational practices throughout the ancient Mediterranean world, claims made about elementary education in a Jewish context often wish to mark out a level of difference from the social norms of Hellenistic society. Josephus, in a not uncommon moment of nationalistic bombast declares:

> Above all we pride ourselves on the education of our children, and we regard as the most essential task in life the observance of our laws and of the pious practices, based thereupon, which we have inherited. (*Contra Ap.* 1.60).

Moreover, Philo claims that Torah formed the basis of the curriculum for Jewish infants: 'for as they maintain that their laws are God-given oracles and they have been educated in this teaching for childhood' (*De Leg.* 210). This same perspective is emphasized by Josephus, when he states that the law 'orders that they [children] be taught to read, and shall learn both the laws and the deeds of their forefathers', (*Contra Ap.* 2.204).[44] While *IGT* attempts to infuse its educational scenes with a Jewish flavour, both by the second teachers proposal to teach Hebrew letters after Greek, and the third scene portraying Jesus teaching the law, notwithstanding these details, there are other aspects which reflect a non-Jewish setting of primary education. The repeated emphasis on learning Greek letters is not a practice confined to the non-Jewish, Greek-speaking eastern Mediterranean world. The Roman orator and educationalist Quintilian advocated that the learning of letters was the appropriate

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[43] For the Greek text and these corresponding English translations see Burke (ed.), *De infantia Iesu euangelium Thomae graece*, 522-523.

[44] For a fuller discussion of elementary education in a Jewish context see Foster, 'Educating Jesus: The Search for a Plausible Context', 26-30.

starting point. 'It will be best therefore for children to begin by learning their [letters'] appearance and names', (Quint. *Institutio Oratoria* 1.1.25). However, more significantly, Quintilian, who was born in Spain and later resided in Rome, advised that,

> I prefer that a boy should begin with the Greek language, because he will acquire Latin, which is in general use, even though we tried to prevent him, and because, at the same time, he ought first to be instructed in Greek learning, from which ours is derived (Quint. *Institutio Oratoria* 1.1.12).

Although *IGT* provides no justification in the second educational scene for the sequence of the proposed bilingual curriculum, 'first I shall teach him Greek, then Hebrew', its perspective fits remarkably well with the canon of the leading educationalist of the first century whose ideas shaped the subsequent educational curriculum. From these fleeting and partial clues contained in the three schooling scenes, a stronger case can be made for a provenance for *IGT* outside of a Jewish setting. This agrees with Burke's conclusion, based on the entirety of the text:

> As for the place of origin, Palestine seems unlikely, but Syrian Antioch or Asia Minor account for much of the evidence. Both regions have been suggested for the composition of *Luke*, they allow for its speedy dissemination in both the West and the East, and it is in Antioch where Chrysostom, the earliest secure witness to the παιδικά came into contact with the text in the late fourth century.[45]

While the educational scenes themselves do not contain any details that identify Syria or Asia Minor as more likely than any other part of the non-Jewish ancient Mediterranean world, the educational details would certainly not be anachronistic in either of those contexts.

As to identifying the purpose of the educational scenes, this is perhaps at one level a more straightforward task than that of determining clues concerning the provenance of the text. Even through the lens of what appears to be a disturbing portrayal of the boy Jesus, time and again the text emphasizes his wonder-working powers and his superior knowledge and wisdom. It is this last aspect that is the goal of the educational scenes. While all three scenes underscore Jesus' superiority over his teachers, the final scene has the third teacher explicitly declare, 'but already he is full of grace (χάριτι) and wisdom (σοφίας)' (*IGT* 15.6). While not wishing to impose modern psychological categories on an ancient text, there can be little doubt that at least in its extended form the text wishes to portray Jesus as undergoing a developmental process as he uses his powers and knowledge in a more mature and responsible way. This same developmental aspect is to be seen in the three schooling scenes. Aasgard may well be correct that *IGT* is

> a story for children about Jesus, true God and true child. It is a story about a Jesus with whom they could identify, a story with both seriousness and humour, and a story well fit both to entertain and to edify.[46]

The educational scenes lend further weight to this understanding. They resonate with children's experiences of elementary education, they entertain by allowing children to gain the upper hand in an educational context where they were often forced to conform through a regime of harsh punishments, and at the same time in an unconventional manner the 'otherness' of Jesus is affirmed alongside the child's rebellious human nature. In this way the text demonstrates that 'theology' when widely understood, can be seen as being undertaken on a variety of levels in early

[45] Burke (ed.), *De infantia Iesu euangelium Thomae graece*, 212.
[46] Aasgard, *The Childhood of Jesus*, 216.

Christian texts. While *IGT* remains a baffling text in many respects, it is an important example of the diversity that could exist in early Christian piety.